

tion, this stuff will still sell by the truckload.

Finally, Antony Swithin reaches the end of his “Perilous Quest for Lyonesse” in **The Nine Gods of Safaddne** – crazy name, crazy guy! – (Fontana, £7.99). Don’t despair, his hero Simon Branthwaite finds his brother and father at last and discovers the English colony on Rockall they have named Lyonesse. For once the cover art really does tell you something about the contents of the book, for the climax does indeed take place in a pair of twin castles linked together by a single-span rope bridge, and yes there are bad guys on black unicorns involved in the battle. However Swithin continues to give us copious and unnecessary information about his construct Rockall – an extra continent in mid-Atlantic with numerous lands, peoples, flora, fauna and gods – and yet at the same time to piss away the climaxes of his plot by having villains kill themselves at the first sign of opposition, armies swept away by handy avalanches and invasions thwarted by unexpected tricks of the tide. Well blimey, Tone, (you keep expecting the characters to say) that was handy!

(Wendy Bradley)

Wit, Womanhood and Slapstick

Chris Gilmore

It’s got to be admitted – women are in general less loathsome than men, and Kipling had it all wrong: the male of the species is deadlier. Or maybe that’s not it at all; “the English are noble, the English are nice” – nicer than their American counterparts, anyway.

Such would seem to be the subtext of Anne Billson’s first novel, **Suckers** (Pan, £4.99), ostensibly a modern-dress vampire yarn, but principally a psychological study of the first-person anti-heroine, Dora Vale. Dora is a grade-A unmitigated bitch – pointlessly vindictive, sexually predatory, pathologically dishonest, much given to self-pity, as uncharitable in her judgments as she’s mean with drinks and cigarettes, superficial to a depth that terrifies, and a borderline junkie. Her milieu is the fringe of London airhead publishing, where she poses as a “creative consultant,” selling manufactured marketing statistics to any publisher gullible enough to pay for them. It’s an arresting profile, which Billson builds up layer by layer in Part One of the novel, so that it takes a while to realize that Dora is basically harmless. She

doesn’t actually do anything more wicked than to bombard with nuisance calls and poison-pen letters a woman who once gazumped her out of a flat.

Yet I drew an immediate parallel with *American Psycho*. The Atlantic ocean notwithstanding, her world is essentially Bateman’s: a world obsessed with the dreariest aspects of fashion, and too busy updating its icons to be aware of their trashiness. Dora’s no less hooked on the tinsel than everyone else she knows, but here the first of her two virtues comes to the fore: she has some genuine taste of her own – not all that good, but honestly come by. It never leaves her at a loss for a cynical wisecrack, and when she doesn’t voice them, she shares them all with the reader. It embarrasses her, of course. Noting (and hating) that black has become the colour, she makes a point of attending a party in a red dress, but bottles halfway out by covering it with a black jacket and as many black accessories as she can cram on.

Her other virtue is the one without which no virtue and few vices can be of much effect: Dora’s moral and physical courage never fail. Whether penetrating a vampire citadel, facing down a senior vampire’s chief of staff, slugging it out with crucifix and garlic in a borrowed bathrobe or coping with her own unrequited and ignoble love, Dora dives in as deep, stays down as long and comes up as muddy as the situation demands. Naturally, I fell in love with her, as I’m sure was Anne Billson’s intention.

With such heavy emphasis on developing a single character the structure suffers. Virtually nothing happens in Part One, and Part Two flashes back to Dora’s earlier encounters with vampire kind. In Parts Three and Four the story gets under way, as the vampires’ plan to dominate the world unfolds, along with Dora’s increasingly frenetic attempts, if not to stop it, at least to divert some of it to her own ends. These are not helped by her being drunk much of the time, but the vampires have problems of their own. The plan calls for the creation of an army of expendable semi-vampires, chosen from the ranks of the yuppies and media types to be found in Docklands, whose parasitic personalities make them especially suitable for conversion. They still snort coke, incidentally, and the existential effect of cutting a line on a mirror in which you cast no reflection is one of the few aspects of vampire lifestyle not to receive Dora’s commentary. Incompetence on both sides rapidly raises the blood-and-guts count, reaching a bad taste nadir when Dora, cornered in a vampire wine bar, finds her period starting and the pirhanas already getting above themselves.

The press release pushes *Suckers* as a satire on yuppie-dom, which I suppose

it is in part, but that’s the least important aspect. It’s a black and bloody celebration of wit, womanhood and slapstick, beautifully sustained to a thoroughly satisfying climax. By way of a bonus, Pan has done the decent thing and brought it out in B-format at a fiver – good value in these hard times, and proves it can still be done. Pan, continue; others, copy!

My generation will never forget Poul Anderson’s Dominic Flandry, gallant, *galant*, hard-drinking, angst-ridden bulwark of an effete empire against the ever more impudent encroachments of the insuperable Long Night; for the current generation Lois McMaster Bujold has produced Miles Vorsigan, frail and dwarfish scion of a noble line, allergic to liquor and much else besides, and morbidly conscious of his unattractive physique. The only person in **Borders of Infinity** (Pan, £4.99) who really fancies him is the hermaphrodite Bel Thorne, but as Bel fancies a female “quaddie” (no legs but four arms) even more, that does little for his confidence. The girl he actually gets is an eight-foot monster and a virgin to boot, but Miles manages; he is a man of indomitable will.

Miles’s world of Barrayar has been recently devastated by atomic war, so that as well as his low stature and brittle bones, Miles must contend with anti-mutant prejudice, despite not being one himself but the victim of insult in utero. His mother was poisoned and almost killed during pregnancy, and he knows that any offspring he sires will resemble his heroic father and grandfather more than himself. He also knows that to emphasize the distinction is to give in to the prejudice, which it’s part of his long-term plan to eradicate.

It sounds politically correct to a gruesome degree, yet Miles and Flandry would instantly recognize each other, and get on well; both are utterly committed to their feudal obligations. Yet their cases are dissimilar, in that for Flandry feudalism was a *pis aller*, adopted in desperation after the degeneration of more liberal and sophisticated political forms, whereas for Miles it is a temporary measure, adopted in the wake of disaster, and to be displaced by more liberal etc. forms in the near future.

The present book is a fix-up of three of Miles’s adventures from *Analog* in the late 1980s. In retrospect all three plots seem somewhat contrived, but Bujold brings to them enough ingenuity and emotional commitment to carry the reader. She handles human vulnerability well, and is moreover a mistress of suspense. In the first Miles must judge a case of infanticide among his people, having due regard for the pressures working upon them; in the

huge muscles bulging right through the fur, mouth open, showing big yellow teeth, fat stubby canines. Fists as big as a waz-ho-don’s head.

Ta-den got out beside him quickly, looking around wildly, assessing the situation. He barked, “Ad-yo. Catch. Catch,” then crouched and launched himself at the tor-o-don’s legs. Too late now to simply distract.

The male stumbled over him, but didn’t quite fall, kneeling, bending, snapping its jaws at Ta-den, who shouted something, a cry of pain. Om-at jumped, landing on its shoulders, driving it flat on the river-bank mud, while Ta-den rolled away. Strong! This was worse than trying to wrestle with Pan-at-lee, who was the strongest waz-ho-don anyone had ever heard of. The tor-o-don humped up under him, trying to reach around, then reaching down, grabbing at his legs, fingernails scoring bare skin, little fear-lines of pain. Om-at could do nothing but maintain his grip on two fistfuls of coarse hair. The tor-o-don stood up with Om-at riding his shoulders, snarling with rage and frustration, obviously unhurt, unafraid.

Om-at felt a sudden twist of fear. This wasn’t going to work.

Crack! The tor-o-don staggered, clutching his head, howling. Ta-den was in front of him, holding a big river cobble in both hands. Crack. Right on the forehead.

The male spun, hurling Om-at off his back, and reached for Ta-den, who dropped the rock, shouting his fear, trying to scramble away. Too late. He screamed as the tor-o-don twisted his arms.

Om-at got to his feet, grabbed the rock, got behind the tor-o-don. The sound it made on the back of the flat skull was sullen and hollow. The tor-o-don grunted, dropping Ta-den. Om-at hit him again. The tor-o-don turned, eyes addled, reaching for him. Om-at hit him in the middle of the face, amazed at the sudden splash of bright blood. The tor-o-don went to his knees and Om-at hit him again, right on the broad eyebrow ridge. The tor-o-don went down, bleeding from the ears, struggled feebly for a moment, went still.

Om-at stood poised, adrenaline roaring through his veins, ready, but it was over. He suddenly felt sick and weak, arms falling, hands releasing the cobble. “Ta-den.”

Ta-den looked up at him, eyes big. “Ow...” he whispered, touching a bloody bite on his shoulder. It was a bad one, but not the worst Om-at had seen. A little mud from the river bed would soothe it. They both stood, looking around.

Some distance away, Pan-sat and O-dan struggled with a tor-o-don female they’d pinned, barely able to hold her down. Id-an, minus his stick, sat in the middle of the stream, where he’d apparently been thrown, looking dazed. The other five tor-o-dons, a female, the four children, were gone.

Ta-den slapped him on the shoulder. He pointed to the female, “Guest-gift,” then at the dead male, “Dinner!”

Om-at smiled, nodded. They’d never be able to carry two dead bodies back to camp. Just the female, then. And they’d butcher the male here, eat what they could, leave the rest for the wild dogs and the vultures. He looked up. Yes. There were already one or two drifting about, high up in the sky. Or... the female

